

## Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01 INR-10  
L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 SP-02 SS-15 ICA-11  
HA-05 MCT-01 /072 W  
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R 171917Z MAY 78  
FM AMEMBASSY LONDON  
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 6234  
INFO AMEMBASSY DUBLIN  
AMCONSUL BELFAST

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LONDON 07823

E.O. 11652: XGDS-1  
TAGS: PINS PINT SHUM UK  
SUBJECT: TERRORIST PRISONERS PROTEST CRIMINAL STATUS  
IN NORTHERN IRELAND

THIS MESSAGE WAS PREPARED BY CONGEN BELFAST MAY 12. ALL  
BUT PARAGRAPH NINE IS LIMITED OFFICIAL USE.

BEGIN LIMITED OFFICIAL USE  
SUMMARY. REPUBLICAN AND SYMPATHETIC ORGANIZATIONS ARE  
CAMPAIGNING TO FORCE THE UK GOVERNMENT TO GIVE IN EFFECT  
PRISONER-OF-WAR STATUS TO CONVICTED PROVISIONAL IRA  
PRISONERS SERVING SENTENCES IN NORTHERN IRELAND.  
PRISONERS HAVE BEEN PROTESTING DENIAL OF THIS SPECIAL  
STATUS FOR ALMOST TWO YEARS, BY REFUSING TO FOLLOW  
PRISON RULES. SINCE MID-MARCH THEY HAVE STRIKINGLY  
INTENSIFIED THEIR PROTEST, AND AS A RESULT MANY CELLS  
AND CORRIDORS IN THE MAZE PRISON NEAR BELFAST ARE IN  
DEPLORABLE CONDITION. SINCE THE PRISONERS' DEGRADING  
CONDITION IS SELF-INFLICTED, THE PRISONERS SEEM TO HAVE  
SYMPATHY ONLY FROM THEIR FAMILIES AND REPUBLICAN TRUE  
BELIEVERS. REPUBLICANS ALLEGE HARSH TREATMENT BY  
WARDERS, BUT THE EVIDENCE IS SUSPECT. HMG IS STANDING  
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FIRM: IT IS UNDER LITTLE PRESSURE, AND GIVING WAY WOULD  
ENCOURAGE THE PROVISIONAL IRA IN ITS TERRORIST CAMPAIGN  
AND POLITICAL AIMS. END SUMMARY.

1. BACKGROUND: IN 1972 THE UK GOVERNMENT GRANTED  
"SPECIAL STATUS" TO ALL PRISONERS SERVING SENTENCES FOR,  
IN ESSENCE, POLITICALLY INSPIRED VIOLENCE. IRA PRISONERS

HAD ENGAGED IN AN EFFECTIVE HUNGER STRIKE FOR THIS STATUS, AND THE NI PRISON SYSTEM WAS UNABLE TO COPE IN THE USUAL WAY WITH THE INCREASING NUMBER OF PRISONERS CONVICTED OF TERRORIST CRIMES. REPUBLICAN AND LOYALIST PRISONERS WERE THEREAFTER PUT INTO SEGREGATED COMPOUNDS WHERE THEY WORE THEIR OWN CLOTHES, DID NO WORK, AND DISCIPLINED THEMSELVES.

2. POLITICAL CONDITIONS HAVING CHANGED AND CONVENTIONAL PRISON FACILITIES EXPANDED, THE THEN SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NI DECIDED THAT AFTER MARCH 1976 PERSONS CONVICTED OF SUCH CRIMES WOULD BE TREATED AS COMMON CRIMINALS, IN CONTRAST TO THOSE WHO ALREADY HAD SPECIAL STATUS, WHO WOULD SERVE OUT THEIR SENTENCES ACCORDINGLY. AS PRISONERS CONVICTED AFTER THE CUTOFF DATE STARTED FILTERING INTO THE PRISON SOME MONTHS LATER, THE LOYALISTS AT FIRST REFUSED TO ABIDE BY THE NEW RULE, BUT THEN DROPPED THEIR OPPOSITION, AS DID MEMBERS OF THE OFFICIAL IRA. BUT THE MAJORITY OF MEMBERS OF THE PROVISIONAL IRA AND TINY IRISH REPUBLICAN SOCIALIST PARTY (AN EXTREMIST OFF-SHOOT) REFUSED TO ACCEPT CRIMINAL STATUS AND "WENT ON THE BLANKET." THEIR OWN CLOTHES REMOVED, THEY REFUSED PRISON CLOTHING, SO THEY HAD ONLY BLANKETS TO WEAR AND COULD OR WOULD NOT GO TO PARTS OF THE PRISON WHERE CLOTHES WERE NEEDED. THEY REFUSED TO WORK, SO HAD TO SPEND MOST OF THEIR TIME IN CELLS, WHICH HAD BEEN BUILT AS SINGLES BUT  
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OFTEN HELD TWO PERSONS BECAUSE OF OVERCROWDING. REFUSING TO COOPERATE, THEIR PRIVILEGES WERE RESTRICTED--IN TERMS E.G. OF MIXING WITH THEIR COMRADES, FAMILY VISITS AND MAIL, FOOD PARCELS, AND ALLOCATION OF TOBACCO AND READING MATERIAL. PERHAPS MOST TELLINGLY, THEY WERE DENIED "REMISSION": FOR THOSE COOPERATING, EACH DAY OF GOOD BEHAVIOR MEANS A DAY OFF THE SENTENCE. IT HAS ALWAYS BEEN CLEAR THAT ACCEPTANCE OF NORMAL PRISON STATUS WOULD GIVE THE PRISONERS MORE PRIVILEGES THAN ARE AVAILABLE IN PRISONS ELSEWHERE IN THE UK.

3. PROTEST CAMPAIGN: THE PROVISIONAL SINN FEIN (PIRA'S POLITICAL ARM), WITH ECHOES FROM OTHER REPUBLICAN-ORIENTED ORGANIZATIONS, LAUNCHED A PUBLICITY CAMPAIGN TO RESTORE SPECIAL, OR POW STATUS, TO THE PRISONERS. WE DETECT SEVERAL MOTIVES: (1) MOST IMPORTANTLY, THE IRA'S HISTORIC COMMITMENT TO THE BELIEF THAT ITS PEOPLE ARE NOT CRIMINALS, BUT SOLDIERS, AND SHOULD BE TREATED AS SUCH; (2) GENUINE CONCERN FOR THE PRISONERS, WHO ARE LIVING IN DIFFICULT CONDITIONS; (3) KEEPING UP PRISONER AND FAMILY MORALE AND SOLIDARITY; (4) BLACKEN HMG'S

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IMAGE; AND (5) PRESSURE HMG INTO CONCESSIONS, WHICH WOULD  
CONTRIBUTE TO THE REPUBLICANS' BROAD POLITICAL AIMS.

4. THUS, PROVISIONAL SINN FEIN PUBLICIZED ALLEGATIONS OF  
MISTREATMENT AND BRUTALITY, AND PURPORTED OR REAL STATE-  
MENTS SMUGGLED OUT OF THE MAZE PRISON ON PRISONERS'  
PITIFUL PHYSICAL CONDITION BUT INDOMITABLE WILL. IT  
SPONSORED A RELATIVES ACTION COMMITTEE, WHICH ORGANIZED  
DEMONSTRATIONS AND SPEAKING ENGAGEMENTS. WOMEN AND GIRLS  
WITH BLANKETS AROUND THEIR SHOULDERS WERE USED SYMBOLI-  
CALLY. THE CONGEN WAS VISITED OR OCCUPIED THREE TIMES  
LAST SUMMER AS PART OF THE CAMPAIGN.

5. NO WASH, NO SLOPS: THIS PRESSURE CAMPAIGN FAILED  
IGNOMINIOUSLY, BUT WAS STEPPED UP ON THE SECOND ANNIVER-  
SARY OF THE END OF SPECIAL STATUS IN MARCH. FIRST A  
COUPLE OF PRISONERS WENT ON A HUNGER-THIRST STRIKE (OR  
AT LEAST WERE PUBLICIZED AS DOING SO) AND ENDED UP IN  
PRISON HOSPITAL. THEN MORE DRAMATICALLY, PRISONERS  
REFUSED TO WASH, TO LEAVE THEIR CELLS FOR THE TOILET,  
AND FINALLY TO CLEAN OUT THEIR SLOP JARS. AS THIS PHASE  
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WENT ON--AND IT CONTINUES, ALTHOUGH APPARENTLY WITH VARYING SUPPORT--SOME RELIEVED THEMSELVES ON THEIR CELL FLOORS, THREW FECES OUT THEIR WINDOWS, POURED THEIR URINE OUT THE DOOR INTO THE CORRIDOR, AND BROKE UP THEIR BEDS.

6. THERE ARE A LITTLE OVER 300 STRIKERS (NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE FIGURES): 291 PIRA AND 15 IRSP, PLUS 25 WOMEN IN THE ARMAGH PRISON WHO REFUSE TO WORK. IN CONTRAST, 156 PIRA MEMBERS ACCEPT PRISON DISCIPLINE, AS DO 344 OTHERS. THERE IS SOME LOYALIST GRUMBLING ABOUT HAVING TO LIVE WITH REPUBLICANS, BUT NO STRIKERS. A TOTAL OF 706 PRISONERS STILL ENJOY SPECIAL STATUS.

7. NO DENOUEMENT: WE SEE NO SIGN OF AN END TO THIS CLASH OF WILLS. THE REPUBLICAN CAMPAIGN CONTINUES SHRILLY BUT INEFFECTIVELY. PRISONER DISCIPLINE MAY BE ENFORCED BY INTIMIDATION OF FAMILIES, BUT IT LOOKS AS IF THE MOVEMENT HAS PEAKED. EVEN THE AUTHORITIES APPEAR UNSURE OF ACTUAL FEELINGS IN THE CELL BLOCKS, HOWEVER, AND PIRA HAS NO EASY WAY TO GET OFF THE HOOK WITHOUT HAVING RECEIVED CONCESSIONS.

8. WE ARE NOT CONVINCED OF WIDESPREAD BRUTALITY CHARGES, ALTHOUGH IMAGINE THAT SOME GUARDS HAVE REACTED. CATHOLIC BISHOP DR. EDWARD DALY OF LONDONDERRY VISITED THE MAZE LATE IN APRIL. HE FOUND THE CELL BLOCKS IN QUESTION DEPRESSING AND GRIM, THE CELLS FILTHY AND A POTENTIAL HEALTH HAZARD. BUT HE SAID THE DEGRADATION WAS LARGELY SELF-INFLICTED, FOUND NO SIGN OF BEATING, AND CALLED ON PIRA TO STOP ITS TERROR IF IT WANTED SYMPATHY FROM THE AUTHORITIES. INEVITABLY SOME OF THE SMELL RUBS OFF ONTO THE GOVERNMENT, BUT SECRETARY OF STATE MASON APPEARS CONFIDENTIAL

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RESOLVED NOT TO GIVE IN TO PIRA. HE IS TOUGH ON TERRORISM, AND CONCESSIONS ON THIS POINT WOULD RAISE HOPES FOR AN EVENTUAL POLITICAL AMNESTY. SINCE THE PRISONERS HAVE RECEIVED SO LITTLE SUPPORT IN THE UK AND ABROAD, THE AUTHORITIES APPEAR UNDER NO SERIOUS PRESSURE TO GIVE IN. END LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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9. WE NEVERTHELESS SEE TWO POSSIBILITIES OF ADDED PRESSURE ON HMG THAT CONCEIVABLY COULD INFLUENCE ITS POSITION:

(1) INTELLIGENCE SOURCES POINT TO A POSSIBLE ATTACK ON PRISON WARDENS. WE ARE TOLD THAT THEIR MORALE CON-

TINUES HIGH, BUT DEATHS COULD RESULT IN THEIR REFUSAL  
TO CONTINUE WORKING.

(2) OTHER HUMAN RIGHTS CONCERNS MIGHT INFLUENCE  
THE PRISON SITUATION: (A) THE APPARENT SUICIDE MAY 10  
IN THE CASTLEREAGH POLICE INTERROGATION CENTER (BELFAST  
78), AND (B) PERHAPS A MORE CRITICAL REPORT THAN EXPECTED  
FROM THE AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL INVESTIGATION HERE LAST  
NOVEMBER. A COPY OF THE LONG REPORT WAS GIVEN TO MASON  
FOR COMMENT LAST WEEKEND, AND WE GATHER IT WAS NOT ALL  
SWEETNESS.

BREWSTER

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## Message Attributes

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BELFAST MAY 12  
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